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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5186
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RUCPDOG/USDOC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHMFIUU/TSA HQ WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHMFIUU/FAA NATIONAL HQ WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEHKS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE 3731

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS AND EB/TRA
SINGAPORE AND TOKYO FOR FAA
COMMERCE FOR BERLINGUETTE

SENSITIVE, SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Power Outage Highlights Philippine Air Safety
Vulnerability

REF: Manila 01390

1. (SBU) Summary: Insufficient backup generators to handle a brief power outage caused the failure of long range radar and communication systems at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA), delaying or cancelling 20 long-haul flights on September 13 and 14. The Manila International Airport Authority (MIAA) and the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines (CAAP) restored most flight operations early morning on September 14. Spurred by President Macapagal-Arroyo's demand for an investigation into the incident, aviation authorities point to outdated systems and poor power supply. The deployment of a new state-of-the-art air safety system is in its preliminary stages. International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and European Union (EU) inspectors are due to review the Philippine air safety system in October and November, respectively. End Summary.

Chain Reaction of Air Safety Concerns

2. (SBU) On the afternoon of September 13, power fluctuations at NAIA triggered a chain reaction that temporarily impeded communications between pilots and the air traffic center and disabled the long-range radar system. The CAAP issued a Notice to Airmen about the failure and all planes were grounded until the airport authority restored communication between the air traffic control, pilots, and the international hotlines that provide safety redundancy between pilots and their own airline communications personnel. Within six hours, airport authorities resumed partial operations using restored communications links and a medium-range approach radar to guide aircraft, according to official sources.

Delays and Effect on International Flights

3. (U) The radar and communications failure delayed or rerouted 20 long-haul international and domestic passenger flights, including one Continental Airlines flight from Guam. Several cargo planes were also diverted to other airports.

4. (SBU) Although MIAA and CAAP official permitted the restoration of operations, they acknowledge that two of the four radar screens, as well as the long-range radar, are still not working. NAIA is operating under a "flow control" system limiting arrivals and departures at five-minute intervals, rather than the normal two-minute intervals. Industry sources note altitude restrictions remain in place due to the dependence by MIAA on the medium-range approach radar.

Arroyo Orders Investigation in Advance of Planned ICAO and EU
Inspections

¶5. (SBU) The timing of this air safety system failure bodes ill for the upcoming safety reviews of the Philippines by ICAO in October and the EU aviation authorities in November. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) downgraded the Philippines to Category 2 in January 2008 because of serious air safety deficiencies. CAAP has requested postponements of the ICAO visit three times. Two were granted, but the third request was denied.

¶6. (SBU) President Arroyo's order for an investigation into the incident may help accelerate the replacement of the airport's communications, navigation and air traffic management systems. CAAP is expediting the procurement process for this new, Japan-financed project by shortening the window for submission of bids from 90 to 60 days. Embassy Manila is advocating for Raytheon as the sole U.S. participant in one of four international consortiums bidding on the 220 million dollar radar and power system contract. If deployed, its state-of-the-art AutoTrac III system would significantly improve air safety in the Philippines.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: This latest air safety failure points to continuing deep-seated problems within the CAAP (reftel). It may also be embarrassing enough to focus the authorities' attention on resolving long-standing deficiencies. The civil aviation sector serves as a microcosm of the wider Philippine environment in which infrastructure development and safety are hampered by poor governance. End Comment.

KENNEY